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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: BUILDING DEMOCRACY FROM THE  
GRASSROOTS UP

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1. (U) SUMMARY: At the 14th annual meeting of the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan, a multi-ethnic presidential advisory commission, President Nazarbayev emphasized his fundamental goal to build a peaceful, tolerant, multi-ethnic country that would move slowly and responsibly toward making Kazakh the national language. It seemed to be no accident that the many hyphenated Kazakhstani speakers included a Georgian and an Ossetian. We should recognize that the Assembly, although an appointed commission, is an example of grassroots democracy with its 350 members having elicited ideas and opinions from their communities all over the country to make recommendations to the government. Kazakhstan is building the institutions of democracy on its own terms -- and that is all to the good. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) President Nursultan Nazarbayev invited the Chiefs of Mission of the diplomatic corps to attend the plenary session of the 14th annual meeting of the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan at the Palace of Peace and Accord ("The Pyramid") in Astana on October 23. The Assembly, established in 1995 as an advisory council to the president, has 350 appointed members representing each of Kazakhstan's 130 ethnic groups. The Assembly Secretariat is part of the Presidential Administration, and, thus, roughly corresponds to a U.S. White House advisory commission. The Assembly selects nine of its members to fill reserved seats in the 107-member lower house of parliament, and the president introduced the most recent member of parliament selected by the Assembly -- an ethnic Bulgarian. President Nazarbayev's chairmanship is not remote and ceremonial. During the two-hour session with his 40-minute keynote speech and 10 other speakers, he took careful notes, intervened repeatedly to ask questions and make comments and even gentle jokes, and himself summed up all the recommendations proposed by the various speakers. Nazarbayev spoke predominantly in mellifluous Russian, but occasionally summed up his points in very slightly stilted Kazakh.

13. (U) The president's speech emphasized the need to clarify the current Law on the Languages of the Republic of Kazakhstan within the framework of the constitution. His goal, he made clear, was to move the nation slowly and responsibly toward the goal of using Kazakh as the common national language while fully respecting the rights of the national minorities to maintain and teach their own languages in the multitude of national-ethnic cultural centers throughout the country. At one point, he recommended that artistically talented young people consider forming a private company to create animated cartoons in Kazakh that could be broadcast on national television to help children all over the country learn Kazakh from an earliest age. Nazarbayev said the central government would give highest priority in education to three languages: Kazakh, Russian, and English. The president strongly emphasized that all children of Kazakhstan, regardless of ethnic origin, should be brought up as tolerant Kazakhstani patriots who love their country and respect differences in their communities.

14. (U) Besides the president, the ten other speakers included an ethnic Russian, an Armenian, a Georgian, an Ossetian, two Ukrainians (one a woman with a charming Odessa accent), an Uzbek, a Cossack, and others chosen for various achievements but not necessarily based on ethnicity.

-- The Armenian said his parents had been exiled to Kazakhstan in 1937 during the Stalinist purges and had arrived in the dead of winter with only the clothes on their backs. A Sarybay-Kazakh family took them in, thus saving their lives, and treated them like brothers and sisters until they eventually stood on their own feet. He presented the president with volumes in Kazakh and Russian of scholarly studies based on documents in the national archive of

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multiple Soviet nationalities whom Kazakh families had saved from Stalin's purges and helped, later, once they were released from the Gulag.

-- The Georgian said he had returned home in September to visit his parents in a remote mountainous area of Georgia, where he had been surprised to hear his isolated rural relatives praise the peace and tranquility of multi-ethnic Kazakhstan. He said, "They repeatedly commented, 'How happy you must be to live in a peaceful nation.'" At this point, President Nazarbayev interved to comment extemporaneously, "Listen to him carefully, my fellow citizens of Kazakhstan. You don't know you are happy until you lose your happiness. Only when you've lost it can you understand what is everyday happiness."

-- The Ossetian woman told a charming story of coming to a resort in Kazakhstan on the Caspian for summer vacation in the 1970s where she fell in love with a Kazakh boy, married him, became a citizen of Kazakhstan, and has raised her children to be good citizens of Kazakhstan.

-- A slightly bashful, young medalist from the Beijing Olympics (Kazakhstan won 13 medals), clearly a crowd favorite whose presence elicited extended applause, cheers, and whistles, said he was from a common family without any ties to power. He said, "We all know the American Dream; I'm here to tell you we now have the Kazakhstani Dream. If I can do it, every other child in this country can do it, too. No matter who your parents are, you can achieve what you want."

-- A young ethnic-Russian journalist from Astana TV, clearly a celebrity recognized by the audience, told in perfect Kazakh how he had grown up playing with Kazakh boys in his apartment-house courtyard. When he asked his parents why they used different words, they told him he must learn Kazakh perfectly "because that is the wave of the future."

-- Perhaps the only jarring note, at least to our ears, was

an older, clearly old-guard editor of the newspaper, "South Kazakhstan," in Shymkent, who urged the government to establish many more Internet web sites in Kazakh to promote Kazakhstan's ideology -- and to censor rigorously all other web sites to "prevent incitements to inter-ethnic violence."

15. (U) COMMENT: To understand Kazakhstan better, we need to recognize two key points from this event. First, the leadership of Kazakhstan is seized with the concept of building a modern, tolerant, multi-ethnic nation from a multitude of minorities -- and, so far, has been successful. During his keynote speech, Nazarbayev listed not only the most well-known post-Soviet frozen conflicts but also other sites of ethnic violence, some well-known to the West, some obscure. He emphasized that such conflicts have not occurred in independent Kazakhstan. Second, we should recognize that the Assembly, even though an appointed commission, is an example of grassroots representative democracy with its 350 members having elicited ideas and opinions from their communities all over Kazakhstan to make recommendations to the government. Kazakhstan is building the institutions of democracy on its own terms -- and that is all to the good.  
END COMMENT.  
HOAGLAND